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ARTHUR THE BEAUTIFUL BY SYLVIE KESHER

Until a year ago many people thought of him only as of Arthur the Beautiful. Men mentioned his name with friendly disrespect, women with a sigh. Both agreed that the past Director General of the Ministry of Defense, now Israeli Ambassador in Bonn, is a good looking, elegant, silent somewhat pompous man who will do excellently for decorating a cocktail party.

But now everybody says he is doing far better than anyone expected. Certainly he appears freer, more energetic, more popular. People say admiringly that he is the most photographed and most interviewed man in Germany, that at every event the television lenses are directed longer at him than at anyone else, that he is being run after and asked for autographs,

They say that he is giving the Germans complexes, because he is blonder, taller, colder and bluer eyed than other Germans. That he is proud. That he has no "galuth" complexes. That for the Germans he presents the Israeli superman in Hollywood style. That he is a diplomatic James Bond.

In the first stage of the present negotiations with Germany he even dumbfounded his Israeli colleagues. He proved to be aggressive, cold, matter of fact and secure in his direct approach strategy. Unlike his predecessor, Reparations Mission Director Felix Shinnar, he didn't bargain and argue emotively. Unlike him, he does not drive around in a Mercedes but in an impressive D Sitroen. He proudly wears the Legion of Honor Ribbon which he received from the former French Ambassador in Israel. When Mr. Bourdelllette gave him the medal, there was a slight problem. Bourdelllette, who is a small man, was supposed to kiss Ben Nathan on both cheeks, as is the custom. This meant that he had to step on tiptoe. The occasion therefore passed without kissing.

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"His boiling point lies at 150%," they say, "he just doesn't come to a boil." If you know him well you may notice that when he is nervous, he frowns and his right ear trembles a little. After the first stage of negotiations with the Germans, it was said that he doesn't use his nerves at all, only the nerves of his opponents. He is capable to say the rudest things in a quiet voice, in excellent German, with a Viennese accent. They say that West German President Luebbe has complained to journalists that Ben Nathan gave a rude answer when he said that the Germans have already paid enough.

Between one tiring meeting and the other he would invite the members of the delegation for ping pong: Treasury against Foreign Ministry. With negligent elegance he would hand out blue match boxes with his initials.

Well dressed, 45 years old, he is proud of his appearance. He is elegant to a point. "In the winter he looks even better than in the summer," friends in Israel say with feminine jealousy. "Because he puts on more clothes. But in Europe that problem settles itself." For a Viennese and student of the Peretz Chayot High School he is unemotional. He is introvert, a little shy, and does not spark continental charm. He is a poor speaker and knows it. He is not too exact - there even are moments when he is lazy. He doesn't like to work on files. He plays by ear. He works off tension by racing like mad in his car. He plays tennis and ping pong and swims. Is a great expert on wine and French cooking. Smokes cigars and is a pleasant host at small events. His manners are unexceptional. He is the perfect gentleman.

He does not use Sabra slang - doesn't thump people on the back - doesn't laugh out loud. At the Ministry of Defense he issued orders that he was not to be called Mr. Ben Nathan but only Arthur, even by the man who brings around the tea. His wife, however, calls him Usher.

For his secretaries he always brings back little gifts from abroad. At the same time he makes a point of preserving a certain distance.

He didn't get excited when nearly all German papers wrote that he looks more like a German than their Ambassador Pauls. He prefers not to talk about his active part in the Nazi hunt after the 2nd World War. If Golda's attempts to put obstacles in the way of his appointment went on his nerves, he tried to conceal it and almost succeeded. Whenever an Israeli gossip columnist writes that he looks so much like German film star Kurt Juergens he pretends to be annoyed but actually enjoys it very much. Now the time has come when he has his revenge on the gentiles. Everybody tells Kurt Juergens that he looks just like Rotshafter Ben Nathan.